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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001395

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SLIPPERY SLOPE TO SHARI'A?: ISTANBUL DEBATES AKP
EDUCATION REFORMS

1. (sbu) Summary: Ask anyone in Istanbul what's wrong with the Turkish education system and you are likely to get the same answer: overcrowded, under-funded schools tied up in bureaucratic red tape. Fixing the problem, however, has been the subject of considerable acrimonious political debate. Critics charge that the last several governments have all "used" education reform in attempts to solidify and expand their support base, and that AK is similarly using the issue as a back-door to achieving a secret aim to Islamicize Turkey and Turkish society. Those defending AK's proposals for higher education reform and some of its plans for education as a whole say they would go a long way towards addressing inherent injustices and much-needed reforms and might also address a widespread desire for a more conservative and religious environment in Istanbul's schools. End Summary.

2. (sbu) As schools across the city reopen after summer recess, Istanbul residents are unhappy and worried that their children are not getting an adequate education. One taxi driver remarked that there is education "for the rich, but not the poor" (i.e., the rich send their kids to private schools), while a lower-class mother of three said that the system offers "zilch." With 65 students per primary school classroom in Istanbul (after the school day has already been divided into separate morning and afternoon sessions), it is clear there is a chronic shortage of rooms and teachers. Only 10 percent of the students who take the national university entrance exams are able to secure places in Turkish universities (both private and public). Once at university, both students and professors chafe under the centralized restrictions and controls that have been in place since the 1980 coup put an end to widespread student riots and infighting.

Higher Education Council (YOK) and University Reforms

3. (sbu) AK higher education reform proposals aimed at reducing the authority and autonomy of the much-hated Higher Education Council (YOK) have provoked a vigorous debate. Critics we have talked to (including professionals, educators, and the YOK Chairman) claim that rhetoric about "democracy" and "efficiency" merely cloak a hidden Islamic agenda. Specifically, they claim that decentralizing education, by allowing professors to elect their own administrators and rectors, for example, will "hand over control" of the universities (beginning with Erzurum and Marmara Universities) to the "Islamists." One university administrator lamented that the AK party had actually "forced him to defend YOK." The vice chairman of the Istanbul Association of University Professors defended the proposals, however, noting that while imperfect, they had incorporated many of the association's suggestions.

Imam-Hatip (Preacher) Schools and Religious Education

4. (sbu) As "proof" of the government's secret Islamist agenda, critics charge that AK wants to boost attendance in the country's state-run imam-hatip (preacher) schools (of which there are 26 in Istanbul, including the one Prime Minister Erdogan attended), despite the fact that the number of graduates far exceeds the need for imams. By amending a point system for the national university entrance exam that currently disadvantages graduates of vocational schools (only 8 percent of which are imam-hatip schools), AK would roll-back what was a thinly-veiled and highly successful effort initiated in 1997 to discourage families from sending their children to imam-hatip schools. (Note: Imam-hatip enrollment appears to have jumped by 80 percent this year in Istanbul, at least in part on the expectation that the new government would carry out its promises in this regard. End Note.) Suspicious of anyone who sends their children to such schools, critics worry that increasing numbers of religiously conservative graduates (note: in addition to the normal curriculum, imam-hatip students spend half of their class time in religion courses) will go on to university and eventually "infiltrate" the state bureaucracy. The head of an Istanbul imam-hatip graduate association simply pointed to the injustice of a system ("affecting all vocational schools, not just imam-hatips") in which an imam-hatip student this year received a perfect raw score on one of the national exams and did not have enough "points" to get into any of the

university departments he had selected. The administrator of an Istanbul imam-hatip school noted that the point system isn't even "legal" according to existing laws. He also defended the decision of parents to choose such schools, not so their children will become imams, but so they can learn about religion in a more "morally conservative" environment.

School Vouchers and Free Textbooks

[15.](#) (sbu) Another plan to send 10,000 poor students to private high schools with government vouchers was already vetoed by President Sezer on August 14 on the grounds that many of the private schools selected for the program had been "established by people for other reasons" (i.e., Islamist). (Note: Many of the schools were reportedly established by Fethullah Gulen and other tarikats or brotherhoods). Sezer's decision was welcomed by many government critics who argued that the vouchers would merely transfer government funds to tarikat-run schools and educate future generations to be prejudiced against secularism. Yet another project that has yet to be finalized is a government promise to provide free textbooks to students. An Istanbul-based NGO education expert labeled this a "blatant hand-out" that the government would almost certainly try to roll out shortly before next year's local elections. A teachers' union representative stopped short of accusing the government of seeking to "rewrite" history, but speculated that the government would almost certainly choose books that are more in line with their political views and wondered aloud which government crony would be awarded the publishing contract. The fact that photos and "messages" of the PM and Education Minister were included in some of the recently-distributed books has already been labeled by critics as inappropriate propaganda.

Comment

[16.](#) (sbu) While almost all Istanbul residents agree on the need for education reform, at least a substantial minority, particularly among the secular elite, do not trust the AK government to guide the process. There is no clear answer on whether AK's reforms are intended to "islamicize" Turkey, but they do at least represent an effort to address some of the education system's shortcomings. The elements of the discussion that draw the most direct fire (the voucher plan and grumblings about the headscarf ban) still seem to command a good deal of support among the general public in Istanbul.

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